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SUBJECT: GNP DECISION TIME APPROACHES: LEE MYUNG-BAK IN  
DRIVER'S SEAT

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On August 19, the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) will hold its primary in polling booths throughout the country. Polls show a significant lead for front-runner Lee Myung-bak -- anywhere from 5 to 12 percent -- and while the number of undecided voters is still high and there are factors that could still swing the election to Park Geun-hye, most experts pick Lee to win the GNP race. Park has made a strong push in recent weeks and her overall popularity party support has increased, but most experts predict that her efforts will prove too little, too late.

12. (C) The GNP primary has been marked by mudslinging by both leading candidates, more so than in the past as many expect the winner of the GNP candidacy to win the general election. The primary has marked a move away from the closed-door selection process of the past to a semi-open primary system that allows participation of a total of roughly 200,000 people (NOTE: The GNP primary electorate is made up as follows: 46,197 Senior GNP members, 69,496 GNP party members, 69,496 non-member voters, and 46,196 randomly-selected eligible voters who will be polled by phone. END NOTE). Also, for the first time, the GNP held a series of policy debates. Mudslinging and sensational claims got more attention than the policy debates -- Lee Myung-bak even underwent a DNA test to prove he was not Japanese and Park Geun-hye offered to undergo a test to prove she did not give birth to a love-child of a scandal-ridden minister. For the GNP candidate to win in December, whatever the outcome on August 19, the challenge is for the GNP faithful to unite behind one candidate, something that has not always happened.

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PARK GEUN-HYE POSITION  
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13. (C) Park Geun-hye's spokesman, lawmaker Kim Jae-won, told poloff on August 17 that Park would likely win the GNP candidacy by 2-3 percent. He attributed his partisan prediction to concern among GNP faithfuls that Lee Myung-bak was not electable due to his scandal-filled past. On August 16, Park's camp conducted a survey of 2,000 people from the primary electorate that reflected a slight lead for Park. Other Park advisors emphasized that Park's overall support was on the rise and Lee's support was decreasing. While they admitted that Lee has a lead among senior GNP members and in the public poll, they noted that each account for only 20

percent of the primary electorate. However, they emphasized that Park has a lead among GNP party members and the civil electorate, and that these groups are more heavily weighted, each accounting for 30 percent of the electorate. Also, Park supporters are more likely to vote on August 19, another reason Park's camp is hopeful. According to advisor Walter Paik, over 80 percent of the citizen electorate is over age 45 and overall Park has the strongest support with the elderly who remember her father, former President Park Chung-hee, fondly. He also said Park's success hinged on the weather -- it should be either very nice weather or very rainy to keep the younger voters, who strongly favor Lee, away from the polls.

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LEE MYUNG-BAK POSITION  
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14. (C) Lee spokesperson, lawmaker Park Hyung-joon, told poloff that Lee would likely win by a 10 percent margin on Sunday. Dismissing concerns that a higher percentage of Park's supporters might turn out to vote, he said that the Lee camp would make sure its supporters voted on August 19. Park also emphasized that all the accusations of illegal land speculation had proved groundless, and that they would not be a factor in the general election. Lee's foreign policy advisor Dr. Yim Song-bin told poloff that the camp was in good spirits and that he would soon start further preparations for Lee to visit Russia, China and the U.S. after the nomination was secured.

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WON HEE-RYONG  
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15. (C) Third-place GNP candidate Won Hee-ryong told poloff on August 17 that he expected Lee Myung-bak to win the GNP primary due to Lee's strong organization, party support, and strong person-to-person campaigning ability. Before the prosecutor's office released information about Lee Myung-bak's real estate problems, Lee enjoyed a solid 10 percent lead. Due to the latest controversy, Won asserted, Lee would win by less than 10 percent, but still had strong enough support to overcome the recent scandals. Won worried that Park Geun-hye supporters would initially accept Lee's candidacy, but later demand Lee step down as the GNP candidate if more information was uncovered by the prosecutor's office.

16. (C) Won said he hoped to garner five percent support, but acknowledged it would be difficult. Whatever the outcome, Won said, he would campaign for the eventual candidate to show the Korean people, "how politics should be." Won has no chance in 2007, but he has earned some name recognition that will likely help him as he goes for re-election in the National Assembly in 2008 and aims for higher office in the future.

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INDEPENDENT VIEW  
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17. (C) Park Jin, a leading second-term lawmaker, currently the Vice Chairman of the Primary Committee, a neutral position, told poloff on August 17 that Lee would win by five to eight percent. While some note that the undecided could swing the vote for Park Geun-hye, Park Jin stated that those undecided would either not vote, or, if they did, that they would split evenly between Lee and Park. Due to the latest real estate scandals, the gap between the two candidates has narrowed but, Park asserted, as long as there was not another scandal before the vote, Lee would be the next GNP candidate.

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EXPERTS WEIGH IN  
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18. (C) Leading political analyst Park Song-min told poloff that Lee Myung-bak would win the GNP candidacy by around five percent. He noted that he had talked this week to all major polling companies' directors and none of them predicted Park could win on August 19. Particularly important was the gap among the senior GNP members who are strongly for Lee. The senior delegates are made up of National Assembly members and their chosen delegates. Park said that a large majority of lawmakers had firmly decided to support Lee and they could not change course this late in the campaign. Also, Park said, those who supported Lee would not change their mind due to the recent real estate scandals and therefore, even if more information came out over the weekend, it would not be enough to sway Lee's supporters -- rather it might increase their likelihood of voting.

19. (C) As an aside, Park noted that the recent resignation of the Justice Minister Kim Sung-ho was likely tied to the investigation of Lee Myung-bak's past real estate deals. Park said that the former Minister told the prosecutor's office that their investigation was too political and they should not release information on a case from over 10 years ago right before the election. Supposedly, this led to his dismissal by President Roh and the subsequent release of information implicating Lee's older brother in questionable land dealings in the 80s and 90s.

110. (C) Renowned liberal political scientist Kang Won-taek told poloff on August 17 he expected Lee Myung-bak would be the GNP candidate, noting that Lee's 10 percent lead in a August 13 poll was too much to overcome in the final days. However, he raised two concerns for the GNP candidate, whoever it might be. First, the real estate problems that have dominated the headlines for the past few days will not be enough to affect the primary, but, he noted, they could continue to haunt Lee in the December general election. He also pointed to the concern that the GNP might not unite behind one candidate as was hinted at in an August 16 poll in the "Joongang Ilbo" newspaper where 58.9 percent of Lee supporters responded they would not vote for Park in the

general election and 48.9 percent of Park supporters would not support Lee.

111. (C) Also, Kang said the scheduled August 28-30 North-South summit could change the campaign dynamic by introducing peace as a key election issue. While the summit itself would not give a huge boost to any liberal candidate, if the focus of the campaign shifted from its current preoccupation with the economy to a "peace mood," it could give the progressive candidate a chance in the general election.

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POLLS  
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112. (U) One poll of the GNP's delegates, member and civil electors conducted on August 13-14 by Media Research had Lee Myung-bak with an overall lead of 7.3 percent. An August 17 "Hankyoreh Shinmun" newspaper poll of public support only showed Lee's lead had shrunk to 5.7 percent, the lowest recorded to date and much less than the 11.7 percent lead on August 13, just before the prosecutor's announcement. The paper noted that if there was no more negative information from the prosecutor's office, the lead could again widen.

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COMMENT  
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113. (C) The GNP race is well within former Mayor Lee Myung-bak's grasp. His lead is probably insurmountable. Lee, however, will emerge victorious with a divided party and, even worse, a tattered reputation. Also, he will have very little time to bask in the glory as South Koreans now concentrate on the next event -- the North-South summit. Still, given the disarray in the ruling camp and the

continued low approval for the Roh government, the Blue House  
is Lee Myung-bak's to lose.

STANTON